Alexis Franklin

Nonfiction book: ***Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead**

**What are the qualifications of the author?**

Margaret Mead earned her M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University in the 1920’s. In 1925 (three years before publishing *Coming of Age*, her first book), she won a National Research Council Fellowship, at which point she travelled to the Polynesia island Samoa where she studied the lives of adolescent Samoan girls—the subject of this book. Afterward she was awarded an additional Research Fellowships to study adolescence in New Guinea and elsewhere. She is among the original contributors to modern knowledge of indigenous people and modern sociology. Her expertise on Samoan adolescents comes from years spent living amongst the Samoans, under their primitive conditions, speaking their language, interviewing their girls, and observing the courses of their lives in lengthy linear studies.

**How accurate and complete are the facts?**

The quantity of girls interviewed and studied by Mead is too small to be of real statistical significance. Moreover, she dismissed relatively significant proportions of girls as anomalous. A more complete, factual account of Samoan adolescence would certainly include a larger selection of subjects and would avoid dismissing deviations from trends in behavior. Additionally, Mead is widely criticized for her exclusion of males from her research. A complete picture of adolescence would require her to have spoken with young men and boys as well as females, which she never did. Her accuracy has also been called to question because of her insistence on researching local taboos. She compelled highly reluctant Samoans to discuss matters which would otherwise have never been discussed out loud. This stubbornness on her part almost certainly interfered with the authenticity of her research on cultural norms.

**Is the book up-to-date?**

Although first published in 1928, this book is still utilized in sociology classrooms today because it offers a unique glimpse into the lives of indigenous Polynesians. Mead intended it to be evidence that certain fundamental human traits appearing in adolescence are merely cultural. She wanted to be a part of the nature vs. nurture debate, and in her day, she was. Although Mead’s scientific accuracy and reliability is notoriously questioned today, her book remains a fascinating primary source full of interesting, relevant observations about a truly unique civilization.

**Does the author distinguish fact and supposition?**

Mead is reasonably careful to remain objective in her observations in *Coming of Age*. She includes a great deal of quantitative information concerning the behaviors of her subjects, which she shares with readers in multiple formats, including charts in the “Notes” section. Although her data is not statistically significant, it was collected methodically. However, she is often criticized for making sweeping generalizations and personalizations.

**How well is the book organized?**

The book is well organized. It includes a Table of Contents with chapters that are clearly titled in accordance with their content. At the end of the text, Mead includes a significant section of “Notes to Chapters” in which she addresses all of her footnotes with very detailed information from her research. Also at the end of the book is included a section describing Mead’s methodology. Finally there are “Appendix” and “Index and Glossary” sections to further aid readers in finding particular details.

**What literary distinction does the book have?**

This book immediately became a best seller and brought international fame to Margaret Mead. Leading anthropologists, scientists, and teachers around the world were very interested in *Coming of Age* at the time of its publication.